DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 846 AL 001 776

By-Robinson, Lois

Teaching Writing.

Pub Date Mar 69

Note-12p.; Paper given at the Third Annual TESOL Convention, Chicago, Illinois, March 5-8, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.70

Descriptors-*English (Second Language), Teaching Techniques, *Writing Exercises, *Writing Skills

Teaching writing is the frustrating part of teaching English as a second language, yet a secondary-school level student who is literate in his own language can be guided into writing a simple paragraph in English soon after he can read one. Guided writing limits the variety of errors a student can make, gives repeated practice in using a selected sentence pattern correctly, prepares a student to write freely with a manageable number of errors, and allows him to write confidently with no fear of unpleasant surprises. Transformation, insertion, completion, and change-in-point-of-view oral exercises can easily be adapted to guided writing. Copying, generally recommended as the first step in writing English, may be skipped if the student can already write in the Roman alphabet. Dictation, the next step, may begin with the teacher reading a very short sentence which the students repeat aloud and then write. (The teacher then rereads it.) This is followed by "standard paragraph dictation," which the student hears four times. A writing teacher should (1) work on one structure at a time, (2) substitute oral practice for grammatical explanations, (3) assign one or more guided exercises which practice the structure, (4) assign a topic which makes the use of the structure likely, and (5) provide the topic sentence until the student can do so on his own. (AMM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

TESOL Workshop
Chicago
March 5-8, 1969

Teaching Writing

Lois Robinson

Part I

Guided Writing: Definition and Types

Starting Writing Early

Teaching writing is the frustrating part of teaching English as a second language - isn't it? Writing does not fit in easily with the oral approach. Writing asks for more time than it is convenient to give it. Writing yields results slowly. A teacher of intermediate students is tempted to say, 'These students are not ready for writing," and leave any serious wrestling with the problem to the next teacher.

Yet a student who is literate in his own language, who is a graduate of a secondary school abroad, can be guided into writing a paragraph in English soon after he can read one. The paragraph he writes will be far simpler than the ones he can read; nevertheless, it can be a paragraph. From the first, he can write in the form in which he must write eventually. The writing of lists of sentences can be dispensed with almost entirely.

But why tackle the troublesome problem of writing while there is still so much to be done in pronunciation, conversation, and reading? Why? Because the literate student can. Because he wants to.

The literate student takes lightly his ability to make himself more or less understood in three or four languages; he takes seriously

AL 001 776

his competence in his own tongue and in the one he means to make his second language, English. Whether he plans to enter college or not, he is conscious that command of a language includes the ability to write it, and he is eager to get on with the job.

Guided Writing - What It Is

But what about us, the teachers to whom these eager students present their depressing papers? How can we deal with a paper which violates some convention of standard English in almost every sentence? We cannot. There has to be some other way.

There is a way. It is called "controlled" or "guided" writing. Teachers use the two terms interchangeably, but students much prefer the milder "guided," so let's use it.

Guided writing limits the variety of errors a student can make in any one piece of writing. Guided writing gives repeated practice in using a selected sentence pattern correctly. Guided writing prepares a student to write freely with a manageable number of errors, that is, a number his teacher can cope with.

Let me give you a sampling of exercises long used in oral pattern practice which can easily be adapted to guided writing in paragraph form.

The Transformation (Conversion) Exercise

The transformation or conversion exercise, in spite of its formidable title, is the familiar exercise which calls for turning affirmatives into negatives, questions into statements, and so on. The transformation

exercise is extremely useful in teaching the English tense system. Here, for example, is a paragraph of be questions, giving practice in writing the simple present tense in the negative:[1]

> Is Canada south of the United States? Is the Pacific Ocean east of the United States? Are the Rocky Mountains of the West older than the Appalachian Mountains of the East?

The student, who has been instructed to make all statements negative, writes confidently, whatever his knowledge of American geography:

> Canada is not south of the United States. The Pacific Ocean is not east of the United States . . .

The Insertion Exercise

A second type of guided exercise which exerts strong control is the insertion exercise. In the following exercise, all the a's have been removed. The student is asked to copy the paragraph, inserting a's wherever needed. This is the paragraph he receives:

> Housewife in small American town has lot of mechanical help. Housewife always has gas or electric stove. She always has refrigerator, too . . .

This strange paragraph turns back to normal English with the addition of the few a's:

> A housewife in a small American town always has a lot of mechanical help . . .

The Completion Exercise

The completion exercise gives the student decidedly more freedom than the transformation and the insertion exercise, but not more freedom

---

[1] Lois Robinson, Guided Writing and Free Writing: A Text in Composition for English as a Second Language (Harper & Row, publishers), 1967, p. 11.

than he can handle competently. Although he is given only a part of each sentence, that part is so composed that the student's mind leaps to an acceptable way of completing the sentence. For example:

> Lee Chen decided to come to the United States because . . . He came by plane rather than by boat because . . . He decided to share an apartment rather than live alone because . . .

A Change in Point of View

Another type of exercise which gives the student some freedom but does not turn him loose to founder might be called "A Change in Point of View." Mary Finocchiaro shows how this type of exercise can be used almost as soon as the student is writing at all.[1] He is given:

> I went to the movies. I liked the film. The hero was excellent.

The student, asked to write from another point of view, may write:

> I went to the movies. I didn't like the film. The hero was terrible.

(Or he may write something else.)

In summary, the four types of exercise just given are a sampling of exercises long used in oral pattern practice which can easily be adapted to guided writing in paragraph form: the transformation, the insertion, the completion, and the change-in-point-of view exercise.

Now for a little about teaching writing to those who are ready to write.

---

[1]Mary Finocchiaro, English as a Second Language: from Theory to Practice (Regents Publishing Company, Inc., New York 10003), 1964, p. 79.

Part II

Teaching Writing to the Intermediate Student

"Intermediate" Defined

A serious effort with writing begins with the intermediate student. For convenience, let's define a student as intermediate who has had one or several courses in English as a second langauge but who could not possible qualify for freshman composition. Within this broad range in proficiency, I should like to talk about teaching writing on the lower and the upper levels. Really, there are likely to be three terms of work between the low intermediate and the freshman levels, but for convenience I shall assume two levels, calling the lower Course I.

The Lower Intermediate Course

Students in Course I, the lower intermediate course, speak haltingly, do not catch nearly everything said to them, and, when they write, think out what they want to say in their mother tongue and then painfully translate it into English. Obviously, a course helpful to such students will be based on a good reader and a great variety of oral practices. Yet even such students find it bracing to have a little work in writing each class hour. Here are some activities appropriate to them.

Copying

Copying is generally recommended as the first step in writing English. However, if a student has been writing in the Roman alphabet his whole school life, he generally can skip copying and begin with the second recommended step, dictation.

Dictation

Dictation can give practice on any level, in whatever you like: the tense on which you are working, spelling, punctuation, when capitals are used in English. Dictation is excellent for beginners in writing. It sharpens the ear and gives complete guidance. Here is a minute paragraph giving practice in writing sentences with introductory There:

> There is one door in our classroom. There is one table. There are five books on the table. There are ten students sitting on the chairs.

A paragraph of dictation should always be well below the students' reading level. Also, anything which might possibly prove a stumbling block should be practiced on the blackboard beforehand-in the example just given, the spelling of classroom and sitting. The students must write confidently, with no fear of unpleasant suprises.

The following procedure for giving dictation to beginning writers is often recommended:

1. The teacher reads a very short sentence.
2. The students repeat the sentence aloud and then write it.
3. The teacher then reads the sentence a second time.

However, the class can change to standard paragraph dictation as soon as the student can grasp the gist of a statement such as the following by their teacher:

> I am going to give you a paragraph of dictation. First, I will read the entire paragraph. Don't write. Relax and listen. Then I will begin to read a second time, in phrases. You will write. As soon as I reach the end of a sentence, I will go back and repeat the sentence. When I reach the end of the paragraph, I will go back and read the entire paragraph again. You may not interrupt the dictation, but you can be sure you will hear every word four times.

Some teachers cut this to three repetitions,but the system works. Students let go their grip on their pens, relax, and listen intently during the first reading, secure in the knowledge that they will hear each word often enough to catch it on some repetition.

Dictation should be corrected immediately, preferably from a copy of the paragraph handed to each student, even the least advanced correcting his own work. Errors which the students are able to catch themselves "don't count."

Guided Practice Through Lists of Sentences

Even if the exercises in your textbook consist of lists of sentences meant primarily for oral practice, you still can give your students valuable practice in guided writing by selecting exercises which naturally elicit full statements. If the direction for an exercise says, "Turn the following present-tense statements into the past tense,"you will get full statements easily:

The children play in the yard.
The children played in the yard.

However, if the text asks, "Why didn't the nomads stay in the big town?" you will almost certainly get, "Because they became restless." The form of the question has invited a short answer. A fragment is natural in conversation; it is a trouble-maker in writing.

Special Work on Prepositions and the Articles

Special practice on the use of prepositions and the articles should be sifted in with other work until outstanding errors cease.

The titles listed below give excellent help with prepositions.[1] Finding enough material on the articles for a student with a long-term difficulty is another matter. It may be simplest to prepare some paragraphs of your own. Just take a paragraph from a reader and remove all the a's, turning the paragraph into an insertion exercise. The student copies the result, putting the a's back in. You repeat the process with another paragraph, this time removing all the the's. Such extra practice eventually helps even a Chinese student.

In summary, the lower intermediate course, Course I, should vastly increase the student's ability to catch what is said to him and to produce what he wants to say. His reading level should rise appreciably. His accent should become less troublesome. And his ability to write straightforward paragraphs in the simple present and past tenses should become established. There will be plenty of errors in his free writing, but they should not swarm.

Course I May Be Enough

The work just mentioned may be the last formal work in English which is useful to some students. By the end of Course I, the laboratory technician is writing her reports more easily and taking part in the talk of the girls at lunch. The draftsman receives a promotion and finds his

---

[1]English Language Services, the key to english, Prepositions 1 (New York, the Macmillan Company), 1964.

_____, the key to english, Prepositions 2 (New York, the Macmillan Company,) 1964.

Grant Taylor, Mastering American English (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company), 1956.

wider contacts taking the place of another class. Fulfilling matriculation requirements does not enter into the plans of these competent people.

Who Is "Upper Intermediate?"

But suppose a student *is* college-bound? What are the signs that he is within striking distance of matriculation and freshman composition?

For one thing, he is already operating in English. He has a job which requires that he speak English at work, or he is taking courses in his technical field, or both. He reads whatever he decides to read in English. It takes him longer than it takes an American-born student to read the same thing, but he reads it. His accent is still noticeable, but he has begun to joke in English. The errors in his pre-semester composition are likely to dismay his prospective teacher, but he is ready to try the upper intermediate course, *Course II*.

The Upper Intermediate Course

Fundamentally, the upper intermediate course consists of a sustained drive to master the English tense system. In addition, more work must be done on the articles and prepositions, well beyond the simpler work done in *Course I*. Adverbial clauses, direct object clauses, and relative clauses must be, not merely understood, but used.

How is a student to master such a mass of structures? So far as I have discovered, he does it best through the alternation of guided writing and free writing, or composition.

A Typical Teaching Sequence

One thing is sure: Students profit little from grammatical explanations; they profit decidedly from oral practice on one grammatical structure at a

a time. Here, for example, is a teaching sequence on the use of the progressive past tense:

1. The teacher puts a single sentence on the blackboard to illustrate the form of the progressive past tense.

2. She then adds a second sentence in the simple last tense to demonstrate the necessary proximity of the simple past and the progressive past.

3. Then she says, "Let's practice orally. I'll give you a statement in the simple past tense. You respond with a statement or two in the progressive past."

   Teacher: I looked into a busy bank.
   Student: People were standing in lines.
   Cashiers were giving out money.

   Teacher: I looked into an open church.
   Student: People were praying.
   An organ was playing.

4. After sufficient oral practice, directions can be given for writing a controlled paragraph in the progressive past. For example:

   A Successful Party

   Begin: "The party was in full swing when I arrived." Proceed to tell what individuals and small groups were doing to amuse themselves. Use the progressive past tense in each sentence. Close, "Decidedly, it was a successful party."

In summary, when teaching writing:

1. Work on one structure at a time.

2. Substitute oral practice for gramatical explanations.

3. Assign one or more guided exercises which give written practice in the structure.

4. Assign a topic for free writing which makes the use of the structure likely.

On Providing the Topic Sentence

In addition to assigning a topic for free writing which makes the use of the structure likely, it is helpful for a long time to provide the topic sentence. The title All Day Sunday suggests the simple present tense, but the direction, "Begin, "I have a little leisure on Sundays,'" clinches the matter.

The title When I Was New in This Country signals the simple past tense, but it gives the student far too much room to worry about what to say. He moves off easily, however, if he is told to begin, "I didn't have much trouble when I was new in this country, but one day . . . " This opening, by the way, so saves the student's pride that an especially secure student sometimes says cheerfully, "I had a lot of trouble," whereupon the teacher can provide an alternate opening.

If I have a trade secret, it is this: Do not make your students struggle with the concept of the topic sentence; just give them the topic sentence until they are ready to plunge into their subject, American style, on their own.

What Should Students Write About?

What should students write about? Something based on a model? Something related to their reading? Something out of their own lives? All three approaches have value, of course, but the third is my favorite - the drawing of the students on their own experience. It relaxes young men and women who come from a formal culture to say something like this:

> We value the individual in this country. We are interested in the little things which are true of you but not of the next person. It is all right here to write about your own doings.

> Besides, you are deliberately being given non-intellectual subjects so that you will not have to struggle with thought and correct expression at the same time.

Students who may have been held by their cultures always to appearing "intelligent" unbend presently and begin to relish writing about what they talk about.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, I should like to quote two paragraphs by students of my own who have practiced guided writing.

The first paragraph was written years ago by a young man who had been through World War II in Hungary. He suddenly wrote:

> I have seen women fighting over a dead horse.
> I have seen men kill for pleasure. I have loved.
> I have been loved. But I have never been patient.

The second paragraph was written last spring by a young man doing his first free writing in a lower intermediate class. He made a pushing motion, asked me for a word for it, and then wrote:

> Mrs. Rodriquez cam back from the supermarket. She shoved the bag of groceries into the refrigerator. She kicked off her shoes. She turned on the TV.

Writing asks for more time than it is convenient to give it. Writing yields results slowly. But it yields them.